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Ethnography and life-history method

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Abstract

There have been several serious and rigorous attempts made by researchers and government sanctioned committees in India to identify the factors that act as roadblocks in the way of satisfactory way of life for Muslims including the goal of quality education for their children. However, they fail to bring out the exact nature of educational experience that takes place under the influence of socio-cultural and political forces. The findings of these studies draw out a large pattern in the lives of Muslim girls, but they do not capture the actual occurring. Realizing the narrowness of large-scale perspective surveys and data-trends, I attempted to develop a nuanced understanding of the schooling of Muslim girls by using ethnography and life-history method. The girls' life-histories helped me to identify the contours that shaped the life of Muslim adolescent girls on a daily basis and in general. The ethnographic framework made it possible to uncover the subtle links between dress, space, time and their relation to ethos- so subtle that no other method could make them visible. Their expression is so thin that they slip out of the grip of the researcher who uses quantitative or even interview-based framework. The present article presents the advantages of using ethnography and life-history method to undertake research on such an intricate subject.

Keywords: ethnography, Muslim girls, life-history method, education, minority

Introduction

Education plays a role in providing dignity and equality to all the people irrespective of their religious faith. It provides a means to act and think individually and thereby loosens one's bonding to the traditional structures of social hierarchy. As a result, education functions as an agency, which secularizes the mind and enriches the economic life of every individual. Education creates a sense of personal achievement and shapes a liberal personality. In sum, the contribution of education to both political and economic life can be envisaged in terms of enabling a person to think individually and be capable of looking after one's own interests. Working with this broader understanding of education, the success of school has been assessed for various groups of learners in every nation. Girls emerge as comprising a salient group in such assessments. The participation of girls--belonging to different communities--in education has been a matter of investigation among researchers, policymakers, feminists and the educational community at large. In this effort, certain compound categories of the groups of learners have emerged such as, Muslim girls. This group represents a double disadvantage owing to the large-scale poverty that Muslims suffer (See Ahmed, 1994; Abusaleh, 1995; SCR, 2006) [2, 1, 18] in India and the conservative interpretations of the life of girls in general in the country and in particular within the community.

Muslims who live as a minority in non-Muslim countries like India are seen by rest of the population as a problem-group. Wherever Muslims live as minorities they increasingly face problems of discrimination in every aspect of life. Wirth (1941) [26] defined a minority group as "a group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, are singled out from the others in the society in which they live for differential and unequal treatment, and who therefore regard themselves as objects of collective discrimination". Muslims constitute the largest religious minority in India.

The Context

Muslims constitute the largest religious minority in India. In proportionate terms, they are 13.5% of the population. However, the health and education of Muslims in India and of Muslim women/girls in particular, has become a cause for serious concern.

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Muslims are often at the margins of socioeconomic and political structures. The Indian Constitution makes special provisions for religious and linguistic minority groups. It allows them to establish and administer educational institutions in order to preserve their language and culture and prohibits the state from any kind of discrimination against such educational institutions in granting aid. There are several schools being run by different organizations for Muslim children under this Constitutional provision. In continuation to this, the New Education Policy (1986) recognized that Muslims constituted the educationally deprived group and resolved to pay greater attention to their education in the interest of equality and social justice. However, the reality is that the participation of Muslim children in different levels of education is low and their girls' is lowest among all the communities. Additionally, there is a widely prevalent stereotype about Muslims do not prefer to send their children, especially girls to school. They are more concerned about religious education and therefore are inclined to send them to madrasas. The schools run under the Constitutional provisions are government-aided schools and provide religious as well as modern education to its students. This means that such schools are run by religious groups but funded by the government. These schools officially follow the curriculum prepared by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and use all its textbooks. The medium of instruction for all subjects is Urdu while Hindi and English are studied as extra languages. In most cases, the government-aided schools for Muslims are separate for boys and girls and enjoy great popularity among people.

I got access to Muslim girls through one such government-aided school situated in a neighbourhood of Delhi where Hindus and Muslims have traditionally existed together. In this article, the school will be referred to as Muslim Girls School (MGS). I decided to study the role of ethos and institutions in the life of adolescent Muslim girls to be able to capture the daily details of their educational experience. The school is run by a charity organization as all government-aided schools are and gets financial assistance from the state. It provides free education to Muslim girls in Urdu medium. There are two noteworthy aspects that need to be discussed here about the schooling of Muslim girls. The first aspect is about the school's gendered perspective on the education of girls which derives from the community's religious and cultural norms in which the chief role of a girl is believed to be in the family. According to the 33rd annual report of the school, "an educated woman is like a blessing for the entire family because she can serve her roles of wife and mother better" (MGS, 2009, p.9) [15]. MGS is not alone in upholding such a gendered view on the education of Muslim girls. Most girls' schools run by charity and religious organizations treat education as instrumental to ensure the family's well-being.

The other noteworthy aspect about the schooling of Muslim girls has to do with the use of Urdu as a medium of instruction in their schools. The State supports Urdu medium schools under the Constitutional obligation to provide freedom to religious and linguistic minorities to preserve and script and language. Muslims fall in this category. The State's support to the Urdu language has less academic reasons related to children's education and is more of a political support. Urdu has acquired the status of an identity issue for Muslims because of a very complex

political history of India during and after British colonization. Since independence, successive governments have supported Urdu as a language of Muslims with the goal of keeping them happy. In the state's educational apparatus, Urdu is a marginalized language and those educated in Urdu medium schools face great difficulties in higher education and employment opportunities. According to Shaban (2015) [19], in such a scenario, the most an Urdu educated student can expect is the job of a teacher in Urdu schools and/or in madrasas. The learning space for Muslim children and girls in particular is an isolated space, which is managed by their community solely. They are taught only by Muslim women at school. The packaging of their schooling is organized in a tight frame of their community.

Existing research on education of Muslim girls

There have been several serious and rigorous attempts made by researchers and government sanctioned committees in India to identify the factors that act as roadblocks in the way of satisfactory way of life for Muslims including the goal of quality education for their children. One stream under such attempts is of large-scale quantitative studies that draw out patterns to describe and analyze the experiences of Muslim girls. (See, Hasan and Menon 2004; SCR, 2006; MWCD, 2007; NUEPA, 2005- 2010; Shaban, 2016) [12, 18, 16, 17] The focus of such studies has been to determine the actual status of Muslim girls' education and the shaping influence of community, class, language and religion on it. The major areas covered in such studies are socio-economic status of the household, educational opportunities, work, political participation and decision-making, and access to the sources of information. Hasan Menon (2004) [12] found in their study that approximately 60% of Muslim women had never been to school. They were illiterate. The Muslim women living in northern part of India were more likely to be illiterate than their counterparts in south. The other finding was that the literacy rate of rural women was the lowest among Muslims. The study found considerable difference in the enrollment rate of Hindu and Muslim girls, the latter being 40.6%. The poor educational indicators of Muslim girls were found to be linked with the economic status of the household. Only 16.1% of the interviewed girls from poor households were going to school and in total, less than 17% of Muslim girls completed the minimum eight years of schooling. An important insight drawn from this study was that the chances of formal education for Muslim girls are shaped by the parent's anxiety to find a suitable groom. Parents do not encourage girls' education as they fear that no boy will agree to marry a girl who is more educated than himself. It was concluded that the community's overall low participation in occupational opportunities is an important factor behind early marriage of girls and their low levels of literacy.

In 2006, a high-level committee was appointed by the Prime Minister of India to inquire into the social, economic and educational status of Indian Muslims. The major focus of the committee was on equity-related concerns including education. The report of the committee—also known as Sachar Committee Report (SCR)—placed them in the larger context of the lives of Indian Muslims which was characterized by issues of security and identity. SCR defined the context of Indian Muslims in terms of following issues: an anti-nationalist image, insecurity arising out of communal violence, with an extended threat perceived by Muslim women, increasing poverty and widespread

discrimination in all sectors of public life leading to a sense of alienation. In such a socio-political scenario, the literacy rate among Muslims was found to be far below national average and the difference is greater for women. The revealing factor was that the literacy rates among Muslims were not increasing fast enough to converge with the national trends. The percentage of children who never enrolled in a school was highest among Muslims. The completion levels of primary and higher-secondary education were also lowest for Muslim children. This resulted in a deficit in higher education where participation of Muslims was the lowest among all other religious communities. The probability of Muslims completing graduation was lower than for all socio-religious groups. The chances of Muslims girls doing the same were even lower.

A nationwide study undertaken by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India (MWCD) (2007) ^[16], had analyzed the literacy and educational status of Muslim girls and women in the country and the socio-cultural and systemic factors that hinder their educational participation. The study found out the reasons behind consistent low literacy rate among Muslim girls and high drop-out rate. The national literacy figures, as available from the several rounds of Census data, showed that Muslims fare below the national average. By quoting, several existing studies, the report brought out the reality of Muslim girls' education which was characterized by poor infrastructure, lack of women teachers, separate Urdu medium schools where only girls can study. An important finding of the study was that while all teachers and parents believed in the importance of girls' education the emphasis on religious education was inevitable. Most parents favored the idea of girls' education but only till the age of puberty and in all girls' school. Poverty restricted several of them from sending their daughters to school despite their desire to do so. "Parents wanted secular education for 'routine requirements' and religious education for 'religious merit'". (p302) The study drew links between educational backwardness and the socio-economic status of the community.

The study of a cross-section of longitudinal data collected by NUEPA from 2005-2010 ^[17] brought up a striking pattern in the drop-out rates of Muslim girls in Delhi. Popularly known as DISE data, it is collected by an apex body called NUEPA ^[i] (National University of Educational Planning and Administration). The enrollment and retention data revealed that there was consistent drop-out at the upper primary level among Muslim girls from 2006 to 2010 at 43% and above (NUEPA, 2010) ^[17]. Shaban (2016) conducted a large-scale survey in the state of Maharashtra. He found that the dropout rate of Muslim girls is higher than that of the girls from other communities even in Urdu medium schools. His main finding was that more than 71% girls did not have any specific aspiration for themselves despite surviving in the school system for a substantial duration. He concluded that the socio-economic marginality of Muslim community is the main reason for the dropout which coupled with poor quality of education affects the aspirations among students especially, girls.

A careful assessment of the above-described studies and reports reveals that they fail to bring out the exact nature of educational experience that takes place under the influence of socio-cultural and political forces. How do these factors

intersect with the everyday nuances of the Muslim girls' negotiation with formal structures of knowledge? The above studies and several other large-scale attempts bring out the data about lower completion rates of Muslim girls in schools. They also help to list the factors that may prove helpful in achieving the goal of education. The findings of these studies draw out a large pattern in the lives of Muslim girls, but they do not capture the actual occurring. These studies did not manage to capture the richness, complexity, and depth of factors that interplay with the educational experiences of Muslim girls. The studies remained limited to larger factors primarily to do with the availability of schools, appropriate medium of instruction and the teachers. They are unable to pay appropriate attention to the levels of meaning, nuances in language, or lived values of Muslim girls who manage to study in schools where teachers and Urdu as a medium of instruction are available. The large-scale quantitative studies as well as case profiles of schools are unable to situate the education in the girls' social, institutional, and relational contexts.

Can a quantitative framework provide an adequate picture of thoughts, attitudes, worries and struggles of young girls and their families? The conclusions of such studies indicate that they cannot penetrate the mind to access values such as purpose of the life and value-related issues in all their richness and complexity. Such studies obscure the hidden curriculum, that is, the ways that socio-cultural values are tacitly transmitted and learned implicitly through language, expectations of the teachers, the norms upheld by school, and the various social relationships of that school with the community. The educational experience is shaped not only by formal classes on school subjects, but also by "the community's and family's interface with the school. Large scale studies do not uncover the qualities of a value-driven life of Muslim girls in which the source of knowledge is tradition and religion. What are the attitudes, experiences, processes, and relations that enhance or hinder educational achievement and related aspirations? What are the requirements of a meaningful and enabling education for minority girls? These questions are not likely to show up in a framework that reduces education to a state scheme or agenda which must be fulfilled and reflected in numbers.

Uncovering the relation between identity and education

Realizing the narrowness of large-scale perspective surveys and data-trends, I attempted to develop a nuanced understanding of the schooling of Muslim girls. In my study, I examined how religious and gender identities combine to create a social force in the context of Muslim girls, and to delineate the role of these identities in shaping their educational experiences and future aspirations. I tried to draw out the insights to appreciate what education can achieve in its role as an enabling mediator, a mediator between the responsibility of a modern state towards its citizens, on one hand, and culture on the other. Socio-cultural processes create an ethos which acquires a relative stability at any given historical phase and is exclusive to that context. The ethos shapes all the social institutions including the school. The exclusivity of that context models the social character of the life lived by the members of a society. The modeling is such that each member learns to act the way the others do and feels adjusted to the larger ethos of the society by doing that. Fromm (1990) ^[7] asserted on the need to understand the specific contexts of human existence in order

to understand a community and the life of its members. My study focused on the multidimensional role of education in the milieu (Mills, 1959) ^[14] which are formed when religion and gender combine to make a socio-cultural force. I undertook a descriptive study which focused on reconstructing the life of Muslim adolescent girls at school and at home. A mixed set of descriptive research methods namely life-history and ethnography were employed in order to study the impact of the elements of socialization and identity formation on the education of adolescent Muslim girls.

To begin with, I developed an instrument which permitted the participants to write their life-histories. The instrument was based on the premise that memory and narrations of life-history are aspects of identity (Gomez, 2010; Warnock, 1989) ^[9, 25]. The focus of the life-history method is on the narration of one's life experiences as a whole, underlining the aspects one regards as important. I requested the participants—adolescent Muslim girls studying in a government-aided school—to write free-hand narratives on two topics: 'The story of my life' and 'Who am I?' I used the framework of life history method but demanded writing from the participants as school was the site of interaction and moreover, in a school setting, unlike home, the idea of writing as a communicative activity has more legitimacy. Vygotsky's view of speech promotes the "writing to learn" movement, in which people use writing as a tool to discover what they have to say" (Peter, 2007; p. 65) ^[24].

The girls' life-histories helped me to identify the contours that shaped the life of Muslim adolescent girls on a daily basis and in general. While narrating life-events, they had used language to reorganize their experiences, feelings and emotions, and thereby defined their identity for themselves and for others. I had met the girls in their school several times as they wrote their life-histories over several sittings. It was during such meetings that other layers of their school-experience started opening up which caught my attention as significant. I noticed that certain girls were not in the classroom as they were sitting on the terrace basking in the sun. The timing of school-periods allotted to me coincided with the afternoon prayer, *Asr*, for which announcements were made on a loudspeaker from two nearby mosques. All the girls used to suddenly stop writing or interacting with me the moment they heard the announcements. The last ten or fifteen minutes of my meeting at the end of school day were utilized by the girls for putting on their veils/head scarves or *chaddars* ^[ii]. Both these activities reduced the time available for my task to about 40-45 minutes and the girls took several sittings to write their life-histories. This gave me lot of time to be in the school and internalize its ethos. It brought to my cognizance a need to systematically observe various events and processes in the school in order to identify the forces under which its daily life was taking a shape.

I had begun to feel that the school was very relaxed and didn't demand rigor from its teachers and students in their teaching and learning activities. My familiarity with the large scale findings on Muslim girls' education coupled with writings on research methods made me realize that ethnography could provide a valid explanation for the everyday details that lead to the overall failure of minority schools or the absence of Muslim girls from the platforms that represent positive interventions made by education.

Ethnography aids in providing an overall conception of schooling, especially schooling in the context of social, political, and economic realities—"the imperatives of culture" in Cohen's (1971) terminology. What constitutes schooling could help me to understand a minority school for girls. As an ethnographer, I decided to examine the features of the wider community that in important ways shaped the patterns that Muslim girls acquired, as well as the responses the school made to those girls.

Life-Histories of MGS girls: Accommodated distinctions

The written life-histories helped me to obtain an accurate profile of girls, important events of their life, spaces they occupied, their values and aspirations and the situations they inhabited. The school as a space of socialization had already emerged during my initial meetings when I coincidentally observed the girls' response to the announcements of afternoon prayer and their pre-departure behaviour of covering themselves. In this section, I shall now describe how the life-histories written by MGS girls helped me to capture the subtleties of the interaction between the religio-cultural norms on one hand and the Muslim girls as learners on the other hand. In the next section, I shall describe how I used ethnography in order to acquire a grip on the ethos in which MGS girls lived and studied.

I read their life-histories several times in order to identify the common themes and expressions with the help of which MGS girls had constructed their narratives. The initial readings of the histories indicated that they carried a rather limited range of issues, themes and incidents. I identified the choices, descriptions, incidents and characters which each MGS girl had used to delineate herself as a person. From the second narrative, I identified the main incident or the broad indicators which the girl had used to describe her life and her future aspirations. These readings made me arrive at a decision that I needed to interview their parents as well in order to gain a perspective on them as socializing agents and with whom the real decision making power about my participants rested. In order to supplement the analysis of the narratives, I used the interviews with parents, tenets of Islam and my own ethnographic-observations.

The central axis of the life-histories of MGS girls was constituted by their parents and their struggles. The girls had visualized their life with their parents in the center and not with any distinction from them. In fact, they insisted on the intertwined reality of life in which parents were the regulators and the primary audience of righteous conduct of their daughters. The vocabulary of good behaviour came from religious values, namely *tehjeeb* (culture), *sharam* (modesty) and *ijjat* (honour). These values seemed to govern the life of MGS girls, and had been internalized by them as the most important values. Their narratives offered me an opportunity to understand how religion expressed itself in a milieu in which girls lived a poverty ridden life with limited means. The life-histories of MGS girls were existential in their content. They had primarily written about the problems their family faced in the immediate context of material survival, such as poverty, loss of job, death and illness of a family member, and also some of their own issues, such as household drudgery because of large family size, fear of early marriage, poor performance in the school and illness. There was always an element of financial worry, and the family's energy remained focused on meeting the basic needs. The time and money available for leisure

activities, such as reading magazines or newspapers, was not there at all. This implied that the parents did not have the intellectual skills to help their daughters in their school-related requirements.

Their narratives brought out the limited support that they get from home to negotiate what the school demands in terms of daily practice and engagement with knowledge. With limited means and frequent occurrence of illness and death in the family, there was no conducive environment at home to study and acquire knowledge and ways of thinking that school demands at the senior secondary stage. Additionally, the life-histories revealed the burden of household chores on MGS girls. There was consistency between the demographic trends quoted by the SCR for working class Muslims and the data of the families of MGS girls. Large family size implies increased responsibilities for household chores for the girls, more time spent on cooking meals, washing clothes and other works. It also implied that the maximum amount of time in a day was spent at home, dedicated to household chores. The possibility of pursuing other interests was minimal. The scope for spending time with neighborhood friends was also negligible. The domestic responsibilities implied increased physical labour before and after the school which impacted their ability to study adversely. It is well known that the burden of household chores is never shared by young boys in the family. The large family size implied that the girls never got any free time at home in the evenings. The confluence of gendered norms for a girl's life and the poverty ridden reality creates an ethos at home that is unable to play its role as an enabling space for the learner to develop in MGS girls.

The parents of MGS girls represented the working class which Breman (2010) ^[5] has described as the people who constitute the large unorganized/informal sector of India's economy. His analysis of economic indicators of this section of the workforce reveals that "it lacks the wherewithal to make both ends meet and in addition to tap into savings or credit in order to take care of ill health if not of unavoidable expenses at the occasion of life cycle events in the household such as the marriage cost of a son or a daughter" (Breman, 2010; p 43) ^[5]. The life of workers in the unorganized sector is characterized by lack of wage protection and any kind of insurance against accidents or problems. They never manage to earn adequate amount to be able to ensure basic facilities for a healthy life, such as a well-ventilated house, clean drinking water, food which provides complete nutrition and good quality woollens in winters. They engage in work in precarious conditions without safety tools such as gloves, helmet, eye protecting units etc. This leads to high incidence of illness which cripples the daily functioning as it is not usually treated by a doctor unless there is a big injury. There were instances of this kind of life under poverty and unstable work in every life-history written by MGS girls. As a result, the children and over-aged family members were also required to contribute in the maintenance of the household and by engaging in some kind of economic activity, such as picking out threads from the stitched clothes or bead-making work, in which employers insist on per piece payment. During home visits, I found that the women of all age-groups in the families of MGS girls were occupied in one of these works. Most of the houses were one-room residences in which considerable space was occupied by items of this kind of work.

Using the broad markers of poverty, illness, death and household work, the girls had mentioned certain ideas repeatedly using a few stock phrases. One of the stock phrases was that they wanted to continue their studies and become a teacher even though the family disapproved of their desire and didn't have the means to support it. The repeated readings of the sentences in which the girls had articulated the desire to become an Urdu teacher, later in life, revealed to me the several nuances of their intention. I arrived at an understanding of these nuances by paying attention to the sequence of ideas in their written life-histories. For instance, what was the preceding idea and what the girl wrote after writing about her desire to become a teacher. I learnt from the written histories that they were all the first ones in their families to reach the senior secondary level of school. For a detailed analysis of all the six stock phrases used by MGS girls, please see a chapter on articulated discourse in Gupta (2015) ^[10].

The occupation of teaching was the only one mentioned by MGS girls as a specific career option. They wrote that they were fond of small children and liked to spend time with them. The choice of teaching as a preferred occupation and the mention of fondness for small children can be seen as linked because both are consistent with the stereotypical image of women as care givers. As revealed in the written life-history, every MGS girl struggled against the community's norm—of educating girls only up to the elementary grades—by arguing that she wanted to become a teacher and that is why she needed to study beyond senior secondary school. Their desire to become a teacher can be deconstructed in the following three ways:

An Accommodated Distinction

In the light of the above discussion, the phrase '*I want to become a teacher*' promises to unravel a layer of the thought process of MGS girls. One aspect of becoming a teacher lies in the viewpoint about becoming different from how the person is at present. The word 'becoming' communicated transformation into 'something different' by doing something in the present. I noticed a teleological connotation in the sense that there was a feeling of a positive change with reference to the present, but the end was neither pre-determined nor foreseeable. The phrase resonates the need to feel distinct from others. MGS girls wanted to retain this distinction in the future. In their viewpoint, the difference, that they observed and felt in themselves from others, could be maintained if they became teachers. As teachers they would be sufficiently different from their mothers and sisters, but not alienated. The learning drawn from their school teachers came handy in this model of accommodated distinction because the girls had learnt about the virtues of a good wife from their teachers as revealed in their narratives.

Limited sphere of interaction with strangers

The daily events of a teacher's life permit a defined sphere of interaction with strangers while allowing sufficient time to be spent at home as compared to other occupations. A community which does not approve of its girls' communication with strangers, especially with men, discourages their possibilities of stepping into professional roles where dealing with all kinds of people cannot be restricted. However, the occupation of school teaching does not pose the threat of communication with outsiders. A

teacher's main job is limited to children with whom interaction is permissible as they are perceived to be non-threatening. There is a prevalent stereotype about girls that they are naturally inclined towards child-care. The image of a teacher in the larger society is that of a professional who is able to retain her feminine traits because her interactional sphere is confined mainly to children. It is apparent that MGS girls are aware of this image and have internalized it and, therefore, want to fulfil it in their lives.

Teaching as a time-sparing job

The other dimension that makes teaching popular among girls is time. As an occupation, teaching allows to earn money without disturbing the traditional division of labour in a family. A girl who desires to become a schoolteacher can remain committed to the socially cherished goal of her life, i.e. as a care taker of the family. It gives sufficient time to a girl to spend on her conventional duties that involve cooking, household chores, attending to relatives, doing rituals over religious festivals, childbearing and child rearing. Three long vacations in a school calendar during summer, winter and autumn create a flexible structure in which a balance can be achieved between occupational and familial responsibilities. Additionally, the half-day nature of a schoolwork has given rise to an image that it is less exhausting as compared to any other occupation. A teacher's job seems capable of accommodating all religio-traditional customs and least disturbing to the conventional roles of girls in family. In this perceptual frame, teaching is a moderate occupation; it does not create any upheaval in the designated roles of women in the family setting. It does not challenge the homeward orientation of a woman's life even though she steps into an occupational role. The job of teaching in a school, thus serves as a middle ground between the outside world and the traditional role of a woman as a housekeeper.

MGS girls have internalized this essentialized image of teaching and, therefore, the ones who insist on becoming a teacher despite several odds are, in fact, conveying an acceptance of the community's norm of a homebound life with a slight modification. The stock phrase, *I want to become a teacher*, thus, reveals a constructed frame of life which merges the demands of the religious community and the low socio-economic class of the family. It marks the stretch that MGS girls have secured by loosening the rigid boundaries of the pattern of girls' life and their aspirations established in their socio-economic milieu. By aspiring to become teachers, they have stretched the community's norms, though on a miniscule scale and through though their desire is already accommodated in the larger design of a pre-destined life.

The life-histories of MGS girls brought forth their daily events, real character of the spent every evening and morning at home, thought processes and problems that shaped their abilities as learners. While reading and analyzing their life-histories, I grasped the lived details of the life of girls from poor Muslim families. These details do not come under our grip in large scale studies or data trends. Their findings that poverty and gender impact the life of girls and their learning do not convey much in the absence of the rich details that the life-history method helped me to capture. The study brought out exactly what happens at home every morning and evening because of which the girls

like MGS girls do not appear successful at platforms that get created with the help of education.

The life-histories of MGS girls also carried the rich information about spaces that they accessed. In my study, I developed the profiles of those spaces based on ethnographic framework. The observations and the insights drawn from them are presented in the following section.

Ethnography: Study of social interactions

The life histories of MGS girls provided me their words on the relevant concerns of their life. I got access to each girl's view of reality and the categories of experiences, factors as well as the spaces that constituted it. I was aware that ethnographic research has proved popular and successful in developing understanding of social and cultural processes in educational settings. I had noticed that the MGS had a culture of its own which was different from other schools and drew its framework from the community's religio-traditional norms. According to Arias (2008) ^[4], "ethnography includes the study of our culture and reminds us that all human beings are, to some extent, the product of culture. In recognizing the fact, we can turn the analysis to understand smaller "cultures" or groups of humans to further study (p. 93). I decided to augment the knowledge collected through life-histories by ethnographic observations because "ethnography is a means of identifying significant categories of human experience up close and personal and enriches the inquiry process and generates new analytic insights" (Genzuk, p.3)

The appealing aspect of ethnography is its emphasis on the importance of the native, the actor in the scene, as informant.... People are not subjects; they are experts on what the ethnographer wants to find out about.... (Spindler p.490). I had already accessed the MGS girls as informants about their life through their life-histories.

My ethnographic observations constituted observations which I made while being in the school and during home-visits. I was present in the school for 3-4 hours every day. I maintained daily diaries in which I recorded the events I witnessed, issues which I overheard being discussed, problems which were resolved in my presence and the observations which I made of the school's everyday functioning. I observed what teachers did at different points of time in a school-day, what the students did and the interaction between teachers and students outside their classrooms. I deconstructed that the school was linked by the formal and informal political process to the economic and religious group interests that gave a religio-political character to the school. My familiarity with the framework of ethnography had taught me that everything that happened inside the school was potentially significant, but certain things were more significant than others. Following, Malinowski (1960) ^[13] most of what happens inside the school is somehow related to what happens outside it, but some of these relationships are stronger than others. My notes enabled me to reconstruct the milieu in which MGS girls lived and studied. I constructed the profiles of all the three spaces in order to bring out the elements of gendering that they introduced in the life of MGS girls. When I visited their homes, I physically accessed the spaces which they had mentioned in their narratives. These spaces consisted of a nearby bazar and the lanes in which their houses were located. In my diary entries, I maintained a detailed account of every visit. My account included points such as: how I

reached the house, whose help I ended up taking, how I felt when I spotted the house and what were the physical setting in which the interview could be taken. After every interview, I spent some time walking around the house to be able to place it in the larger context of the neighborhood. The participant observations made at school, at home, on the streets leading to their homes and in the bazar enabled me to 'immerse' myself in the settings occupied by MGS girls thereby generating a rich understanding of relationship between socio-cultural forces and girls' daily life. The ethnographic observations gave me opportunities to gather empirical insights into socio-cultural practices that normally remain hidden from the public gaze. I have presented here two sets of ethnographic observations and their analysis. For several such other observations, please see the chapter titled *Ethos as a Gendering Device* in Gupta (2015)^[10].

Gendered Access to Homes

The addresses of all MGS girls consisted of the name of a mosque or a gate, name of a street or lane and a number. Two samples of addresses are: '1829, Ahata Mir Bukhari, and '3478, Near Haz Manjil Masjid Gate. These names reflected a Muslim ethos and a continued association with the historic medieval past when Old Delhi was the capital of Mughal rulers. I always took a metro to reach the neighborhood and then hired a cycle rickshaw to reach the closest point to the house of the girl that I had to visit. The last stretch of my journey was usually on foot as that involved negotiating a very narrow and intricate web of houses and lanes. In order to reach the home of any MGS girl, the rickshaw entered a cramped lane after covering the approach road to that lane. These cramped lanes also had shops on both sides and houses on top of them. A careful observation revealed that the narrow lanes constituted a wholesale market of different kinds of goods, such as glass and stone beads, utensils and beauty products. In between there were shops of hardware, meat, grocery, mobile recharge coupons, soft-drinks, *guttka* pouches (beetle nut mixed with tobacco), printing press, computer services such as typing, printing, other kinds of junk, motor-garage, small eateries and mosques. From that lane, the rickshaw entered a still narrower lane which had even smaller shops of daily need items, mainly fruits, vegetables, grains and meat. Finally, the rickshaw stopped at the opening of a lane which was marked by a mosque or the gate and did not have any clear beginning or the end. A pattern emerged in the way people helped me in finding the house during every visit. Initially, it appeared to be a coincidence, but later on I figured out that I actually had made an entry in a closely-knit community where people know their neighbors very well and were also related to each other. It must be pointed out that it was only men who stood around the gates or mosques and noticed me. As I entered a gate or stood near a mosque, identifying it as a landmark, I was greeted by several inquisitive eyes. The men immediately identified me as an outsider and offered to help. During the initial visits, when I was reluctant to accept their help, I was warned in a stern voice. I, then, made it a practice to ask for directions to reach a particular house. While I walked in narrow lanes following the directions given by the passersby, a group of young boys always followed me. I noticed while walking in those lanes that it was an industrial area. There was either a repair market dealing with multinational brands of washing machines and refrigerators or there were smaller industrial

units of metal-beating, and printing presses. I usually went in the afternoon or evening when parents were at home. At times, it was dark because the lanes were neither well lit nor spacious enough to allow sunlight. I, therefore, often, found it difficult to spot the house number which faded in most cases. The passing by men offered to help on their own and pointed to a house as soon as I uttered the house number. Apparently, these men already knew what I was looking for though I had not spoken to them earlier.

During every visit, I heard the loud announcements of a call for prayer from the nearby mosque. My visits coincided with, at least, one of the five daily prayers, so I always crossed a crowd of men going to a mosque for prayer or coming out of the mosque after the prayer. The final lane was extremely narrow in every case, barely allowing two people to walk side by side. The journeys to the houses of MGS girls gave me a feeling every time as if I was trying to access something which was heavily guarded and, therefore, one needed to cross several channels in order to reach one's destination. I had taken a prior appointment for the visit by calling up, so I usually found the MGS girl and her family waiting for me. The girls never offered to receive me at the entry of the lane or to meet me at the mosque which was surrounded by men and boys at any point of time. The opening conversation, in most of the cases, was how I must have faced a problem in finding the house. They were fully aware of the inaccessibility of their houses to the outsiders.

This portrait of my journeys undertaken to reach the homes of MGS girls brings forth the pattern of mixed land-use and unstructured confines of time and space. The confines of time, space and noise were not sharply defined, and religion appeared to be the only organizing force. In these journeys, one had to first search a locality, then a mosque or a gate, then a lane, and finally a house number. In these journeys I encountered a sex-based division of space. The approaching lanes to the houses, landmark mosques and gates and the intersection points were essentially male spaces. The male member may be a small child of 4 or an adolescent boy or a grown up man but he had the authority to use those spaces for various purposes, such as playing with friends, just standing, noticing the activities of others, discussing a cricket match or a new mobile model, sharing snacks and reflecting on the challenges of life. These spaces marked the extension of home and provided a sense of togetherness to the members who were related to each other by way of inter-marriage and otherwise. However, these members were only men who had the opportunity of experiencing the togetherness. In an ideal Muslim residence, one is expected to maintain a distinct *zenana* (women's quarters), space for women and *mardana* (men quarters), space for men. The homes of MGS girls were too small to maintain this distinction, therefore, the spaces outside homes had acquired the character of male quarters. The function of male quarters is to provide space for an exclusive assembly of men wherein they can pursue their matters of interest and behave exclusively like men. For the male members of the families of MGS girls, spaces surrounding their homes served this function. This distinction acquired its completeness when home became an exclusively female space; marking the boundary of girl's movement and interest. The household drudgery for the daily maintenance of large family kept girls and women busy in their space and did not allow home to become a parallel of what outside space was for men, i.e. space for socializing and being themselves. At the first

level, there was a difference in the space and at the next level there was a difference in the activities performed in these spaces. The male space was outside the home and has to be crossed first in order to reach the women in the households of MGS girls. Thus, the people who controlled the outside space became protectors of the inner space i.e. home which defined the spatial boundaries for and girls. These protectors regulated the movement of strangers as well as familiar people towards homes. The group of young boys who followed me in the lanes acquired this distinction— of space as well as of their roles in relation to it— from their older relatives.

It can be concluded that the traditional division of spaces in Muslim families had acquired a specific character in a lower socio-economic setting. The distinction existed, but it provided for even more freedom to men and further restricted girl's movement. The mothers of MGS girls remained anxious on account of the fact that in order to go to school, their daughters crossed male-exclusive spaces at least two times in a day. This anxiety reflected their acknowledgement of the division of the spaces in their ethos. The life-histories had revealed that the school was the only reason for the girls to step out of homes and cross the male domains on a regular basis. The school thus played the role of an agency that gives the practice of negotiating physical spaces that the community and home render prohibited. It would be interesting to figure out how much independence of mobility this daily movement gives rise to in the minds of MGS girls or does it end as soon as the school ends in their lives. However, the home gives a strong sense of distinction between male and female space and the activities performed on them. Young boys and men indulge in free discussions ranging from politics to new products in the market to sports, but in female space the interaction is limited to instructions about cooking, quantity and the process. The probability of MGS girls and women of their families discussing events and concerns pertaining to larger life is zilch because both of them were equally unexposed. They do not see the world and the world doesn't see them usually.

School as Gendered a Space as Home was

The MGS was located in a narrow lane of the same neighborhood in Old Delhi. I crossed a couple of motor garages to reach a gate which seemed to have been constructed to remain invisible in the crowd of large buildings. A small board placed on top of the gate declared that it was the entry point to a girls' school. The sides of the street, on which the gate of the building was located, were marked by overflowing drains. I climbed a narrow and winding stair case to reach the first floor of the building where the school was located. The girls wore a uniform consisting of white salwar ^[iii] with a blue kurta ^[iv] with a *dupatta* ^[v] that was pinned on their shoulders. The *dupatta* formed a V shape on their chests and its loose, hanging ends were used by the girls to cover their heads whenever they heard *azaan* announced on a loudspeaker from the nearby mosques. During morning assembly, all the girls and teachers kept their heads covered. The prayer was in Arabic; it was a compilation of verses from the Quran. In order to offer the prayer every morning, the girls stood in rows in two corridors which joined at right angle. The principal and the teachers stood at the point where both the corridors meet. The teachers used their eyes to indicate to specific

girls if their heads were not covered properly. Girls were seen adjusting the *dupattas* on the head all the time during the morning- prayer.

There was no open ground in the school to stand and offer prayers as is usually done in Indian schools.

While I was present in the school as a researcher, there was a death in a teacher's family. In order to offer condolence to the teacher's family, MGS offered the ritualistic prayer, Salat-al-Janazah (funeral prayer) and observed the customary bereavement lasting 3 days. During this period, the students of Grades XI and XII read the Quran as part of *Quran khainee* (customary reading of the Quran) in their classrooms. For this purpose, furniture was moved out of the rooms and floor-sitting was organized. The classrooms were of varying size, some were very small while others were large, but the windows were at the same height in every classroom, six feet from the ground. No one could see outside as the windows were too high to allow any view. The rooms were generally dark windows were too small and high to allow the sunlight to peep in. High window panes were covered by the hanging arches on the corridors which had been further covered by tent. The arches were designed in Islamic architectural style. They had inbuilt grills of cement which made it impossible for the outsiders to see what was inside. The furniture was extremely old and had rough edges which gave it a worn out and partly chewed up character. The corners of the walls of the classrooms and the corridors were covered by cobwebs.

I found girls walking to and fro in the corridors from morning to afternoon, creating a feeling that they were loitering around. Several girls kept going to the terrace which had high boundary walls and a small library. As the bell rang, signifying the end of a period and beginning of the next, girls walked towards the terrace in large numbers from all the classrooms. They sat on the terrace enjoying in the sun as it was cold inside the classrooms. They often complained that their thick and long hair did not get dry in the morning, so they needed to sit on the terrace. Teachers did not object even if they noticed their absence. The terrace served the purpose of being a girls' space, away from their teachers' eyes.

Post-lunch, many classrooms remained without a teacher. In such classrooms, girls could be found painting henna on their friends' palms or eating street food. The kinds of food they ate are typically associated with girls in India, such as tamarind in various flavors, its roasted seeds, *choorans* (powdered fruits with salts of various kinds) of many kinds and candies. I saw many girls painting their nails and learning to apply kohl while in the classroom without a teacher. Some girls played local games which used pebbles, tamarind seeds and broken bangles. While playing or applying henna, they carried on animated discussions about movie stars, songs, romantic scenes, dresses, somebody's wedding and someone's experience of being chased by a boy. Girls sleeping—lowering their heads on the desks— was a common sight. If asked, they either complained of headache or simply expressed the need to sleep. There was a subtle acceptance of this among the teachers as if they knew what went on when they were not there. Meanwhile, the teachers relaxed in the principal's room and chatted. There seemed a mutual acceptance and allowance for women and girls to spend time in the afternoon in the same manner as they might at home. The school, as an institution, took a

permissive stance in the context of young girls (students) as well as adult women (teachers).

Fifteen to twenty minutes before the bell announcing the end of the day rang, I found girls getting restless. Many of them started taking out their veils or *chaddars* and others re-adjusted their *dupatta* and head scarf. The last ten minutes, although not officially assigned, were treated as if they were meant for the girls to wear their covers properly. They put on their veils or head scarves or *chaddars*, then took their bags on their shoulders and, finally, asked a friend to verify if all was well, meaning whether they were covered properly. I noticed that every girl took that reassurance from a friend without fail. The girls started moving out even before the bell rang, but they never ran after it had rung. The staircase was narrow and a crowd of 650 girls used it to go out, but the movement was so streamlined and controlled that it was impossible to imagine a stampede. They all walked in measured steps. Though this was not a rehearsed collective exercise, it was performed smoothly, each individual girl playing her role to make the collective exit smooth.

As an institution, any school is shaped by the dispositions that its members i.e. students and teachers, bring from home. These include dispositions towards the use of space and time. Compared to home, the use of space and time in school is generally restricted, formal and regulated (e.g. Hall, 1959; Silvern 1988) ^[11, 21]. However, the portrait of MGS given above provided a different reality. Both time and space were treated and used loosely in the school. There was an official time-table, and space organization in terms of the allocation of classrooms to different grades. However, in its daily functioning, MGS presented many instances of unrestricted use of both time and space. The students and teachers of MGS appeared to re-enact certain dispositions in the school space which they brought from home. Taking rest in the afternoon or sitting in the sun on the terrace are instances of home-school continuity in this respect. While the afternoon was structured in time-table slots designated to different school-subjects, in reality, it was spent the way women spend afternoon at home by relaxing after the morning shift of household chores. At home, women pay attention to their hair, skin and other such needs and talk about matters of domestic interest. There was a continuity between school and home in the case of time and space related behaviour. There was a home like ease in their conduct at school. Thus, we can analyze, using Bernstein (1977), that there was a 'weak framing' in the use of space and time which allowed the gendered codes of conduct used in the home environment to seep in the school space. Both teachers and students, contributed to the gendering of the school's ethos by bringing in dispositions imbibed at home. Devices like the time-table and the division of school space into classes did not create any discontinuity as far as the gendering of girls around the use of space and time was concerned.

Smith (2003) ^[22] has applied the construct of habitus on organizations. His argument is that as an institution, the school's ethos is constantly shaped under the influence of students' habituses and that of social institutions in the external environment. The way in which students and teachers of MGS behave in certain situations is similar to how they behave outside the school space. Inside the school, their individual habituses do not take a backseat. Since, there is coherence in their habituses, arising out of their

belonging to the same religious community, a cumulative habitus emerges and creates an ethos in the school that is consistent with the community's ethos. In its internal structures, MGS upheld the cultural beliefs and values of the community whose daughters it educated. It observed religious and cultural rituals, including those associated with mourning, indicating that the school existed within the ethos of the community and not as an independent institution. It did not offer any alternative explanations to its students on the human experience of death and birth. Its ideological structures were in complete tandem with the community's cosmology though the school offered science as a compulsory subject till Grade X which is mandatory for all schools in India. The ethos of MGS was continually constructed by the ideas prevalent in Islam rather than by ideas that stem from different fields of modern knowledge which the school presented to its students inside the classrooms.

There was another dimension to the continuity between the life MGS girls led at home and at school. It drew from the economic profile of the community. As indicated in the section on life-history method, the student population of MGS came from working class families engaged in skilled or semi-skilled labour. The homes of MGS girls were characterized by deprivation of resources and space. The school was no different. The school was run with bare minimum resources. Shortage of teachers, and teaching-learning material and inadequate space characterize the institution. The deprivation that MGS girls experienced at home continued at the school. It came across as a poverty-ridden school for the poor. Interestingly, the school flouted one of the important practices followed in Islam which has to be with space. The designated space for prayer in Islam is a mosque which always houses a large and open space implying the unrestricted access to *Allah*. However, in MGS, there was no open and large space for the girls to offer their morning prayers in the scheduled. They stood in narrow corridors to offer their prayers. The reason for not designing a large and open space in MGS could be that the model of mosque is that of an exclusively male institution. Muslim women, anyhow, pray at home thus, the principle of open space to access the God is not applied on girls in a literal sense. The other use of a large and open space for school students is to play sports and games. The school obviously doesn't consider its role as significant in providing this experience which is missing at home. The space crunch at home continues at MGS and the girls get no bodily experiences of jumping, running and stretching which are crucial for their development. Moreover, the orientation of school in the context of girls is consistent with that of home. It serves as a guarding boundary that cuts off the connection with the outside world. This is evident in the architecture of the school. The home achieved the exclusion by way of intricate lanes and men as protectors positioned outside the home and the school achieved it by its architecture. The means are different but the role played by both the institutions and the end is same and consistent with each other. Interestingly, protection is a role ascribed to man in the Quran which has been described in the following manner:

"Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because Allah has made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend from their means. -(V.4:34)

This quotation from the Quran presents a picture of clear separation of roles for men and women in Islam. At home, men play this role effectively and in the learning space, the school assumes this male responsibility. The school thus treats the community's religion as a valid source of guidelines rather than the regulatory authorities of school education in the city.

The description of girl's behaviour how the school day ends for them established the specific experience of growing up and becoming a woman. The manner in which they covered themselves and walked in measured steps connoted that MGS girls were no more adolescent girls though they were physically passing through the years of adolescence. They had already become women. The dispositions around dress and behaviour of a good Muslim woman that they had acquired at home were reproduced in the school which had a certifying role in their lives. MGS, thus, provided a formal institutional space in which the habitus of Muslim girls was re-constructed and acquired legitimacy. The interplay between a good Muslim girl and a student of MGS was quite dense and had hardly any room for inconsistencies. It was regulated by religious beliefs and cultural practices in which a modern curriculum was accommodated simply as a content to become familiar with. The pedagogic experiences of MGS girls offered little space where an intellectual or reflective struggle might grow between different fields of knowledge and faith. Rather, the uncritical and unreflective school experience permitted compatibility between the idea of a good Muslim girl and the student of a school which officially transacted a modern and progressive curriculum.

The merit of ethnographic framework is precisely in capturing such subtle layers of the functioning of school. It is in these layers of conduct related to the use of physical space, dress, and expectations of daily activities that we notice how the goals of education face a constant challenge. MGS is an instance of an institution that doesn't demand rigour in the use of time and space from its learners. It also doesn't engage them radically in alternative frameworks of explanations about life and its stages as a result it becomes an agency of religious and gendered socialization just like home. Its everyday details help us to appreciate that it does manage to bring the girls out of the boundaries of home and helps them to experience independent mobility and interaction, but it doesn't create strong alternative aspirations and codes of conduct. It doesn't teach its girls to jump and run like children and adolescents.

The setting of MGS and girls' homes were shaped by the differences and similarities between me and the participants. I was different from them, so it became possible for me to use the ethnographic principle of making the normal strange and attending to its details. It helped me to get hold of subtleties of becoming a student at MGS and draw insights into how religious socialization takes place at home, in the lanes leading to home and at school. I brought out how every physical space that MGS girls accessed had acquired the ethos specific to their religious community. The ethos acquired an agency in itself and became a socializing force in their life. Ethnography enabled me to undertake a deliberate inquiry process guided by a point of view. In this case, it was the educational experience of Muslim girls shaped by their community's 'minority-ness'. Every aspect of their home and school was shaped by the shadow of 'minority-ness' of the MGS girls' families and school. I experienced their impoverished life and its regularities at

home and school by being there in both the situations. Ethnography encouraged me to recognize the complexity of factors underlying minority school failure, which could not be captured by focusing solely on girl's "home environment" nor could it be adequately dealt with by focusing on the school alone. It helped me to figure out how exactly school events are built up by forces originating in religio-traditional settings and that how they influenced learning drawn by Muslim girls. The ethnographic framework made it possible to uncover the subtle links between dress, space, time and their relation to ethos- so subtle that no other method could make them visible. Their expression is so thin that they slip out of the grip of the researcher who uses quantitative or even interview based framework. It is only when these subtleties of becoming a Muslim girl much before becoming a learner of a field of knowledge were observed in a specific ethos that the real assessment of the schooling of Muslim girls could be made. The study brought out the everyday conflicts that the school maintains with larger goals of education.

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Notes

ⁱNUEPA is an autonomous institution run by the Government of India in order to provide specific guidance on school education. NUEPA regularly collects district level data on various educational indicators in the entire country. The data is published annually in the form of DISE reports i.e. District Level Indicators of School Education.

ⁱⁱa cloth used as a head covering (and veil) by Muslim girls and women

ⁱⁱⁱLoose fitting pants traditionally worn by girls and women in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

^{iv} Loose fitting long shirt which comes up to the knees of the wearer.

^v A piece of fabric that girls and women take on their shoulders to cover their breast. It is considered a symbol of modesty and careful dressing.